

2016-17 Eligibility Determination for Free and Reduced Price Meals
Quick Reference Guide
Based on the USDA Eligibility Manual for School Meals (EM), July 2016

Sponsors must provide notification of free and reduced price meal applications and a parent/guardian letter to all households annually. The eligibility official must sign, date, and mark the correct level of benefits on all applications, if manually approved. If using application approval software to track each student's eligibility and history, the Sponsor can either sign, date, and mark the correct level of benefits on all applications or print out, sign, and date a monthly log.

Confidentiality: Applications, Direct Certification, Homeless and Migrant documents are confidential.

Categorical Eligibility (EM pages 29-36)

A child is categorically eligible for free meal benefits if any member of the household receives benefits under an Assistance Program or the child is documented through Other Source Categorical Eligibility.

Direct Certification (EM pages 54-57)

A Student whose name is on the Maine Direct certification list is categorically eligible for free meals.

- Free benefits may be extended to all students in the household even if the other students' names are not found on the direct certification list. Make a notation in your records that indicates the connection to the student(s) listed on the direct certification list
- The direct certification list must be downloaded a minimum of three times each school year.
 - At or around the beginning of the school year (i.e., Aug. 1)
 - Three months after the beginning of the school year
 - Six months after the beginning of the school year.

SNAP or TANF or FDPIR (EM page 52-54)

A student from a household receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), or participating in the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) is categorically eligible for Free meal benefits when the household submits a completed application.

A complete SNAP or TANF application must include:

1. Student(s) name(s)
2. a) A legitimate SNAP case number, **OR**
b) A legitimate TANF case number, **OR**
c) An indication the household is participating in FDPIR
3. Signature of an adult household member

Mainecare and EBT card numbers are not acceptable case numbers.

FDPIR Households do not have case numbers, but are maintained on a tribal list.

Migrant Student(s) (EM page 32-33, 53)

A migrant student is categorically eligible for Free meal benefits if student's name is on dated list of eligible students submitted by the Maine Migrant Coordinator.

Homeless Student(s) (EM pages 34-35, 53)

A student is categorically eligible for free meal benefits if:

1. The district's *Homeless Liaison* submits documentation that the student is homeless (dated roster/email) **OR**
2. The household submits an application based on SNAP, TANF, FDPIR or income **OR**
3. The *Homeless Liaison* submit an application for the student, **OR**
4. The school principal or homeless shelter director completes an application based on their knowledge of the student's situation.

Foster Child (EM pages 35-36, 53)

Students placed in foster care by state child welfare agency or by the court are categorically eligible for Free Benefits. The rest of the household must be determined separately and are not automatically eligible for Free Benefits.

Income Eligibility (EM pages 49-52)

Eligibility is determined from a complete confidential application.

Households cannot be required to submit applications for Free or Reduced Price benefits

A complete income application must include:

1. Student(s) name(s);
2. Names of all household members;
3. Amount, source, and frequency of current income for each household member;
4. Signature of an adult household member; and
5. Last 4 digits of Social Security number of the adult household member signing the application, **OR** an indication that no adult household member has a social security number.

The eligibility official must compare the household's size and income to the current federal Income Eligibility Guidelines to determine the correct eligibility category.

Child's Income (EM page 25)

The earnings of a child who is full-time or regular part-time employee, or who receives income from other sources such as Social Security, must be listed on the application as income. Infrequent earnings are not counted as income and should not be listed on the application.

Foster Child Income (EM page 25)

Foster children are members of the household where they reside. The foster child's personal income is only considered when the foster family applies for meal benefits for the non-foster children in the household. A foster child's eligibility status is Free regardless of the household's income. The foster child's eligibility is not extended to other members in the household.

Zero or No Income (EM page 22, 50)

Applications that list zero income, leave an income field blank, or have checked the no income box, are eligible for free meal benefits.

INCOME CALCULATIONS, INCOMPLETE APPLICATIONS AND ELIGIBILITY NOTIFICATION

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Income Conversions: (EM page 50-51) If there are multiple income sources with more than one frequency, the sponsor must annualize all income by multiplying:

- Weekly income by 52;
- Bi-weekly income (received every 2 weeks) by 26;
- Semi-monthly income (received twice a month) by 24; or
- Monthly income by 12.

Add all un-rounded values and compare to annual income for household size.

Incomplete Applications:

Categorical applications cannot be processed with:

- Invalid or missing SNAP/TANF case numbers
- Missing signature of adult household member
- Information that is inconsistent or unclear

Income applications cannot be processed if:

- The names of household members written do not match the number listed
- Missing the last 4 digits of the Social Security number, and no indication that adult signing the application does not have a Social Security number
- Missing signature of adult submitting application
- Inconsistent or unclear income listed

Sponsors may contact the household to obtain the missing information, except signatures. Household signature must be on the application. Document the contact person's name, date and information provided as part of the conversation. Incomplete applications may also be returned to the household to complete and re-submit.

Notification of Eligibility Determination

1. **Household of eligible students** for Free or Reduced Price benefits may be notified in person, by telephone, or in writing.

2. **Household of Directly Certified students** must be notified about free meal benefits. The notification must include:

- The child is eligible for free meal benefits;
- No further application is necessary;
- An explanation of extended eligibility and how to notify the LEA of any additional children in the household not listed on the notification; and
- How to notify the LEA of free meal benefits are not wanted.

3. **Households of Migrant students** must receive written notification.

4. **Households of denied students** must receive written notification. The eligibility official must identify and retain on file the reasons for the denial. The dates and the official's name may be noted directly on the back of the application. Use the denied meal benefits section of the *Household Eligibility Notification* letter. Records should include: (EM page 62)

- Effective date of the denial
- Date the denial notice is sent to household
- Name of the eligibility official
- A copy of the denial letter sent to the household

Notification letters can be found on our website: <http://www.maine.gov/doe/nutrition/forms/index.html>

Effective Date of Eligibility Determinations (EM page 43-44) Children are certified as eligible for free or reduced price meal benefits on the date the household application is approved. However, LEAs have flexibility concerning the effective date of certification of applications. If a LEA chooses, it can establish the date of submission of an application as the effective date of eligibility, rather than the date the official approves it. For direct certification, the effective date of eligibility for free meals could be the date on the direct certification file first identifying the student as eligible for direct certification, rather than the date the sponsor accesses and processes the direct certification file. LEAs using this flexibility must do so consistently for all children in all participating programs.

FREQUENTLY ASKED TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

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Adequate Notice – A new lower eligibility determination should be implemented only after the family has been notified. For example, in the case of a household that received free benefits the previous year and will now receive reduced price benefits for the new school year; adequate notice of 10 calendar days should be provided.

Adopted Child – or whom a household has accepted legal responsibility is considered a member of that household. If the adoption is a *subsidized* adoption...that subsidy is included in total household income (EM page 29)

Confidentiality/Disclosure – The National School Lunch Act specifies that persons directly connected with the administration or enforcement of certain programs or activities are permitted to have access to children's eligibility information. This disclosure is optional and not a requirement. For more information refer to this section of the Eligibility Guidance Manual or contact your assigned Child Nutrition Specialist (EM page 80)

Error-prone – Household applications within \$100/month of Income Guidelines (\$1,200 per year) used for Standard sample size 3% Error-prone Verification.

FDPIR (Food Distribution Program to Indian Reservations) – There is no case number - head of household is maintained on a tribal list.

Foreign Exchange Student –...is considered to be a member of the household in which he/she resides, i.e., the household hosting the student. (EM page 30)

Foster Child –... is considered a member of the foster parents' household. Whether placed by the State child welfare agency or a court, in order for a child to be considered categorically eligible for free meals, the state must retain legal custody of the child. (EM page 30)

Household –...is based on economic units. An economic unit is a group of related or unrelated individuals who are not residents of an institution or boarding house but who are living as one economic unit and who share housing and/or significant income and expenses. Generally, individuals residing in the same house are an economic unit. However, more than one economic unit may reside together in the same house. Separate economic units in the same house are characterized by prorating expenses and economic independence from one another. (EM page 28)

Households That Fail to Apply/Non-applicant – Local officials may complete an application for student(s) known to be eligible if the household fails to apply. The application must be completed with household size and income information known to the official. The source of information **MUST** be noted. Names of household members, Social Security number and adult signature do not need to be obtained. The household must be notified in writing that the student is receiving Free or Reduced Price benefits. The household retains the right to refuse benefits. These applications are excluded from verification. (EM page 44)

Joint Custody – In cases where joint custody has been awarded and the child physically changes residences, the child is part of the household where he/she resides. LEAs are no longer required to track residence changes. In these situations, if both parents apply for benefits in the same LEA for the child, and different eligibility statuses result, the greatest benefit level is used. For example, if the mother's situation results in eligibility for Free meals but the father's application is denied, the child would receive Free meals regardless of which parent had custody at the time. The child's eligibility status is valid for the school year based on the household submitting the application and approved for benefits. (EM page 30)

REQUIRED ELIGIBILITY DOCUMENTATION AND RESOURCES

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Required Eligibility Documentation Retain the following records for at least seven years after the end of the fiscal year in which the information is obtained, plus the current operating year (or longer if required by an audit).

1. All Confidential meal applications, including denied applications and inactive applications
2. All Direct Certification documentation. The Direct Certification (DC) files obtained from DOE CNP, must be retained electronically or hard copy
3. Homeless and Migrant eligible students lists
4. All monthly (benefits issuance) roster lists

Resources

Eligibility Manual for School Meals-July 2016

<http://maine.gov/doe/nutrition/resources/documents/2017EligibilityManualForSchoolMeals.pdf>

DOE CNP Applications and parent/guardian letters are located at:

<http://www.maine.gov/doe/nutrition/forms/index.html>

Application and parent/guardian letters in thirty-three languages are located on the FNS web page at:

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Application/familyfriendlyapps.html>

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